

Statement of the Honorable Tom Bliley
Subcommittee on Telecommunications, Trade, and Consumer Protection
Hearing on
Reauthorization of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

May 22, 1997

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

I first want to take the opportunity to commend you on the recent hearing you held on air bags. The information from that hearing will go a long way to providing parents, drivers, and passengers alike with the guidance necessary to significantly reduce injuries from air bag deployments.

Today's hearing is the second in the Subcommittee's series of hearings on the reauthorization of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. NHTSA is an agency which serves an important purpose -- ensuring the safety of the vehicles we drive -- but we need to be vigilant in our oversight to ensure that in their zeal to protect, they don't inadvertently do more harm than good.

For instance, there is compelling evidence that the agency chose not to be as forthcoming as it should have been about the dangers associated with air bag deployments. It is only after 64 fatalities -- the majority of whom were children -- the realities of driving a car with air bags have become evident to the public at large. We should never allow bureaucratic short-sightedness to again get in the way of providing the public with as complete information as possible.

Further, there have been allegations that NHTSA has engaged in activities that could easily be termed "Trial by Press Release." Safety is of paramount concern to the nation's consumers. No one argues with the notion that consumers deserve to know about problems with

the vehicles that they drive. But the process must be both fair and effective. The agency should not prematurely announce suspicions about defects so as to ensure that the manufacturer has no choice but to recall vehicles whether or not a defect is ultimately found.

Finally, I have examined the Administration's proposal for NHTSA reauthorization. While the proposals are modest, there are many provisions which give me cause for concern. Chief among them is the inclusion of salvage title provisions in the bill. I have long favored national uniform definitions and procedures for the titling of salvage vehicles. However, my good friend, the gentleman from Washington, Mr. White introduced legislation last year, and I am working with him to advance a similar proposal this year. I think that I speak for both of us when I say that we are happy to engage in a dialogue with the Administration about this topic. However, it is an issue that is best resolved in separate legislation.

Mr. Chairman, these are just a few of the issues presented by NHTSA reauthorization. I am sure that our witnesses will have others, and I look forward to hearing their testimony.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.